

We are delighted to present the venerable Aamer Hussein's take on short stories; Joe Treasure's judgement of judging; and Mashida Rashid's persuasion to take a deep breath and read beyond abnormalities. Don't forget that the SLR writing competition on "Lost and Found" closes in one week! Send your submissions to: DSLITEditor@gmail.com

MUNIZE MANZUR

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

AAMER HUSSEIN

"Short stories? Who reads them?"
"When's the novel?"
"But the story is over before it began."

Just three of the comments or questions I've heard in the 27 years or so since I published my first short story. It's true that at some point, material begins to overflow, control starts to lapse, and if you are the perennially popular Alice Munro your work reaches that odd length called 'the long short story'. But most of us learn early to 'write short', to pare away everything extraneous, focus on the emotional kernel of the tale; half the pleasure of working on a fiction is the discipline required in crafting a coherent piece of writing around a central image or (more usually in my case) a phrase that wafts into your consciousness.

When does a telling phrase become a story? I remember the excitement with which many readers greeted Lydia Davis when, after ploughing through yet another piece, by a much-lauded writer in some American journal, that seemed like a rather sluggish outtake from a novel, they read her sharp little texts that ranged from parable to riddle to paradigm to joke.

But would Davis' book have the same charm if it didn't also include pieces of traditional narrative, or at least a modicum of

narrative flow? Not for me. I want my stories to be stories. When, after my detour into experiments with longer forms, I went back to tight, short pieces possibly more inspired by poetry than by fiction, emotional content still dictated the tale, not a riddle or a philosophical conceit. (A failed marriage. A lonely woman in self-exile. Two old men reliving their lives over the space of a lunch meeting.)

Novels cover a long span of time and can be elastic in their structure. A story has to exist in something that resembles real time but simultaneously practices a deception – in the passing of twenty minutes the reader has to experience two, three or more, and also learn protagonists' past lives, in fragments.

Technically, I now admire stories that are no longer than two or three thousand words long. But the collections I remember best are those in which brief stories grow in your imagination until they seem to fill many pages, or conversely those long stories that are so deftly handled you don't remember how long it took you to read them.

Where, then, does the novella fit in? The brilliant Katherine Anne Porter, in an introduction to her collected stories, wrote: 'novella is a slack, boneless, affected word that we do not to describe anything.' But there is

a rare pleasure in reading those works that have the tension and grace of a short story and the leisure and the space of a novel. Duras' *The Lover* comes to mind, with its relentless dwelling on an obsessive affair and its beautiful arrangement of scattered images around the awkward persona of its teenaged heroine (herself a phantom, alive only in the mind of the ageing narrator who brings her to life on the page).

We had planned to publish my story *Another Gulmohar Tree* as the title story of a new collection, but my editor thought it demanded another kind of attention, and she took the perhaps uncommercial decision of publishing it as a slender book. Today I call the piece a story, though you can name it what you will, but I still take pleasure when I see new editions of the book in the novella format. Does that make a case, then for publishing shorter works on their own, so that they can be read individually with the attention they demand? E-reading facilitates this, but we might also aim for a world in which stories of all lengths are published singly and beautifully, doing honour to the twin arts of the book and the word.

Aamer Hussein is a writer and critic. He is the author of five collections of short stories and reviews regularly for the *Independent*.

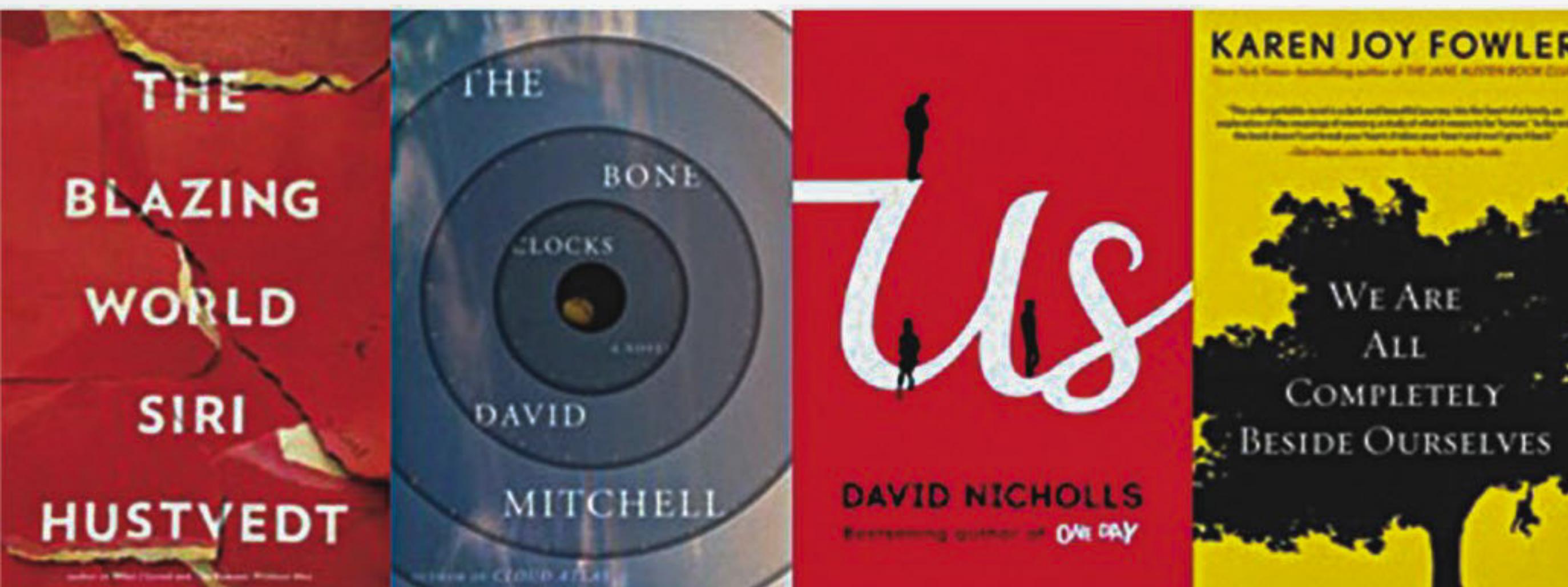


How would you choose the year's best books?

Joe Treasure



THE 2014 MAN BOOKER PRIZE LONGLIST



Last year's Man Booker Prize Long List represented five continents and seven countries, with authors from Australia, Canada, Malaysia, New Zealand and Zimbabwe, alongside three from Ireland and five from Britain.

This year, for the first time, the prize has been opened to writers from the USA. Oddly, the widening of its geographical scope seems to have coincided with a narrowing of its cultural reach. On the current long list a single Australian novel represents the Commonwealth, with two from Ireland, six from Britain and four from the US. In subject matter as well as authorship, the chosen novels seem to be overwhelmingly rooted in Western experience. And there's a marked gender imbalance – only three female writers out of thirteen, whereas last year's list was evenly split, with eight women and seven men.

Publishing that 2013 list, the judges, chaired by travel writer and scholar Robert MacFarlane, described it as 'surely the most diverse' in the prize's history, evidently considering that something to brag about. This year's judges have apparently taken a

different approach. The chairman, philosopher A.C. Grayling, said, 'Our guiding principle was merit. We didn't ask about the nationality or gender, there was no question of tokenism.' That sounds admirable as a philosophical abstraction. Tokenism is generally objectionable, and what could be wrong with basing your judgements on 'merit'?

But artistic merit is a slippery concept. Three years ago, some of the judges raised eyebrows when they revealed the basis on which they'd made their decisions. That year's chairman, retired spy Stella Rimington, set the tone, saying they'd been 'looking for enjoyable books... readable books.' MP Chris Mullin had been in no doubt from the start that the winner would have to 'zip along'. It seemed not to have occurred to them that a book might make demands on a reader and offer more subtle rewards, or that as judges they had a greater responsibility than someone sounding off at a party about what kind of books they happened to like.

In an article in the *Guardian* accompanying news of this year's long list, the

American writer and critic Erica Wagner indicated a more thoughtful set of criteria. She and her fellow judges had been drawn to 'vivid characters', and impressed by books that would bear re-reading or that stand out for the quality of their language, 'ambitious' books that deal with large questions, about 'the making of art', or about 'what it means, finally, to be human'.

These judges had clearly applied their minds seriously to an informed discussion of what 'best' might mean. And yet I can't help wondering whether, if I were a judge, I would have the confidence in the objectivity of my judgement not to step back and take a look at the overall shape of the list I was helping to construct, not to take note of nationality or gender, and not to wonder if, in favouring writers whose cultural experience happened to be closer to mine, I might be underappreciating less familiar qualities.

Joe Treasure is the author of two novels: *"The Male Gaze"* and *"Besotted"*, and teaches creative writing at Royal Holloway, University of London. Read more of him at <http://joettreasure.blogspot.co.uk/>

IMAGINATION They can't tax it

MASHIDA RASHID

I have never stayed at Room 217 of any hotel. I once went through quite a lot of trouble in an over-booked hotel to avoid that room number, but the fear of what lurked in that bathroom made me stand my ground. That one scene from *The Shining*, where little Danny Torrance cycles up to that room in the empty hotel, and the only sound you can hear are his plump legs pumping away furiously before the door creaks open, is the kind that embeds itself in your head forever, and sometimes when you wake up in the middle of the night, you avoid looking at your own bathtub. Such is the magic of Stephen King's horror stories. They stay with you.

Imagine: you are locked in a cabin where a crazed fan of your books threatens to hack off your limbs one by one; or, you are trapped in a car in dead afternoon heat in the middle of nowhere, where the car has stopped working, and your child is sick with thirst, and there is one problem: a rabid dog threatens to attack if you so much as roll down your window; or, you are in a plane and you wake up and see that the whole plane is empty except for ten passengers, and scattered around are wigs, glasses and pacemakers, accessories that were sometimes inside their bodies before they all disappeared into thin air; or, that you live close to an ancient Indian burial ground where they say if you bury your dead, they can come back resuscitated. Very tempting for those who know the grief of loss, but is that what you really want?

Here are my Top 10 Stephen King favourites:

The Shining – A recovering alcoholic must wrestle with demons within and without when he and his family move into a haunted hotel as caretakers.

It – A promise made twenty-eight years ago calls for seven adults to reunite in Derry, Maine, to do battle with the monster that is lurking in Derry's sewers once more.

Salem's Lot – Author Ben Mears returns to Salem's Lot to write a book about a house that has haunted him since childhood only to find his isolated hometown infested with vampires.

Pet Sematary – Recently moved to Ludlow, Louis lives near an ancient Indian burial ground and discovers its sinister properties when the family cat is killed.

Carrie – The story of misfit high-school girl, Carrie White, who gradually discovers that she has telekinetic powers.

Dreamcatcher – Four lifelong friends find themselves pitted against an alien invasion deep in the woods of western Maine.

Brought up in small town Maine, Stephen King draws most of his plots from real life experiences, and refuses to be typecast as just a horror writer. He says that his books are about "an intrusion of the extraordinary into ordinary life and how we deal with it." Born into a poverty stricken family, with a father who abandoned them, King spent his childhood writing stories and selling them at school for pocket money. Although some critics dismiss his talent as a "claptrap of American nonsense," his award in 2003 of The National Book Foundation's medal for distinguished contribution to American Letters speak volumes of his recognition as one of the most widely read writers of modern literature.

For me personally, King's work transcends beyond his macabre plots, to his character sketches, which is comparable to the greats of Dickens. Whether a book has only two characters stuck in a bedroom, or a slew of vampires taking over the county, they have the power to hold their own and to reveal multiple layers, that make you relate to them so much so that 'horror' almost ceases to matter. He writes about life. He teases you to think beyond the normal and almost accept the extraordinary, and believe that this could actually happen. Stephen King continues to be popular through out generations because of his power to captivate the imagination. As he says in an interview, poverty may have stripped him of many opportunities except that of: "Imagination. They can't tax it."

Here are my Top 10 Stephen King favourites:

Cujo – Donna Trenton and her son Tad find themselves trapped in the sweltering car by a monstrous dog that has turned into a killer after being bitten by a rabid bat.

Misery – Novelist Paul Sheldon is rescued from the scene of a car accident by his number one fan only to find himself prisoner, forced to write a book of her whim.

Fire Starter – The government is trying to capture young Charlie and harness her pyrokinetic powers as a weapon.

Gerald's Game – Trapped and alone, Jessie Burlingame's painful childhood memories bedevil her. Her only company is a hungry stray dog and the sundry voices that populate her mind.

Overlook Hotel – Four lifelong friends find themselves pitted against an alien invasion deep in the woods of western Maine.

